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The Nature and Authority of Conscience

Rufus M. Jones, M.A., D.Litt.

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Swarthmore Lecture,
August, 1920

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The Swarthmore Lecture, August, 1920

The Nature and Authority of Conscience

BY

RUFUS M. JONES, M.A., D.Litt.

(*Author of "Studies in Mystical Religion," "Spiritual References," etc., etc.*)

PUBLISHED FOR THE WOODBROOKE EXTENSION COMMITTEE

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Preface

The Swarthmore Lectureship was established by the Woodbrooke Extension Committee, at a meeting held December 9th, 1907: the minute of the Committee providing for "an annual lecture on some subject relating to the message and work of the Society of Friends." The name "Swarthmore" was chosen in memory of the home of Margaret Fox, which was always open to the earnest seeker after Truth, and from which loving words of sympathy and substantial material help were sent to fellow-workers.

The Lectureship has a two-fold purpose: first, to interpret further to the members of the Society of Friends their Message and Mission; and, secondly, to bring before the public the spirit, the aims and the fundamental principles of the Friends.

The Lectures have been delivered on the evening preceding the assembly of the Friends' Yearly Meeting in each year. The present Lecture was delivered on the evening preceding the Conference of all Friends in August, 1920.

A complete list of previous Lectures, as published in book form, will be found at the beginning of this volume.

THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF CONSCIENCE

By Rufus M. Jones, M.A., D.Litt.

I

INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

Sublimity

"The sublime requires the unknown as an element. A cathedral should never be finished. A mountain should be partially hidden by others or enveloped in clouds," wrote Horace Bushnell many years ago. In other words, a sense of the infinite and eternal must be aroused in us before we call the object which moves us *sublime*. It was precisely that aspect which made Kant couple "the moral nature within us" with "the stars in the infinite sky above us," as the two most sublime things in the universe. Both are incapable of boundary;

both are enveloped in mystery; both emerge from and forever suggest a deeper world of reality; both are full of hints and prophecies of more than appears.

I am not for the moment concerned with the sublimity of the stars. I am thinking of that other sublimity, nearer to us and yet even more mysterious, the moral nature in us revealed in personal conscience. We are just now made very familiar with a persistent attempt to reduce man, with all his inner furnishings, to a purely naturalistic being—"a forked radish" as Shakespeare puts it, "with a head fantastically carved." The only thing that concerns us, naturalism asserts, in the study of man, is his behaviour, *i.e.*, what he does in response to his environment, for this alone can be accurately described and explained. Whenever we catch him, he is doing something or he is preparing to do something. A natural process is under way, and this process is due to his native structure plus the influence of his environment. His motives all have a long history in the development of the race behind him and in the social influences that have shaped him. That exalted thing in him which is named "moral nature," or "moral consciousness," fades away under this

analysis into the phrase "accumulated habits of the race," and ethics and religion become a branch of anthropology, a study of behaviour merely pushed back toward the historical starting-point of our strange "forked radish."

There can be no debate about the importance of exact description. We have no quarrel with it. We are under immense obligation to science for the conquests which it has made, and there is no objection at all to the method of ignoring temporarily certain concrete features of the world and of life, as science does, in order to facilitate the work of abstract description and of conquest. But at the same time it is well not to forget the fact that life and the world are full of aspects and experiences which do not permit of exact description or of scientific formulation of the mathematical type. This does not mean that they are not real, or that they are supernatural; it means rather that they possess a type of reality which cannot be got at by the method of analysis and description. They must be dealt with as integral wholes rather than as things made up by the aggregation of many smaller units. All our *values of life* are of this sort. Beauty cannot be reduced to elemental parts, described and causally explained.

Our consciousness of the worth of persons who are precious to us cannot be dissected into the original items which compose it. The certainty of conviction which attaches to our insights of *truth* defies all analysis. The goodness of a pure moral life admits of no adequate analytic description. We have passed out of the sphere of molecular currents where things result from the congeries of atoms, and we are in a world now which includes creative *spirit* and so has sublimities in it.

The world of the senses is indeed a very real world. It touches us at every point. It knocks at all the outer doors of our being. It stands all the tests by which we try its reality. It is surely *there*. It is foolish to deny it or to call it illusion. If it is not real then we have no certainty that anything is real. But it cannot be the whole of reality. It is forever a fragment of a more comprehensive reality, an outer periphery which is never self-explanatory and which demands an inner spiritual centre to complete and explain it. This does not mean, however, that there are two worlds alongside of, or outside of, each other—a material or sensuous world occupying its sphere and ending where the fringes of the spiritual

begin. We shall never return again to a theory of "nature" set over against a foreign and exclusive "supernatural," parted by an impassable chasm. One soon discovers at sea that the horizon which divides the visible part of the ocean from the larger, invisible part of the same ocean is an unreal and only imaginary line of boundary. It alters every moment. The sky, too, turns out to be just as unreal. The sky dome is only our way of seeing the upper air space. There is no dome of crystal up there yonder, bounding the world of nature below and beginning the realm of the supersensuous world, the ethereal demesne where God dwells in His unapproachable glory. That two-world scheme has gone by and was annihilated when Ptolemaic astronomy was exploded. No journey upward into space brings one to God, however far one may travel. Not thus can we supply the defects of "naturalism." No ladder goes up from the top of "nature" to the "supernatural" above it, as though they were arranged in tiers.

"The Beyond is within." It is through the soul of man, the inner self, that the way lies to God. It is close at hand, within us, that the two levels are found—a conscious self always aware of, always confronted with, a More, a

Beyond. We are forever double. We are woefully limited and finite, and yet we are inextricably bound in and conjoined with the infinite. Eternity is in our hearts. We meet every finite object of sense with a universal through which we interpret it and name it to our common fellowship—a universal which no sense experience ever gave us, or ever could give us. From some deeper inner world of Mind, we draw those inevitable compulsions of mathematics and logic to which all facts of experience *must* conform. Something in us, but derived from Something beyond us, enables us to gather up the fleeting and contingent under eternal and necessary forms, so that we can declare that "this truth is true, not only for me but for all men everywhere and forever."

It is also because of this inner junction with the infinite and eternal that we are moved by objects of beauty, and exalted and raised beyond ourselves by the sense of awe and sublimity. Here, too, in this meeting of our own deepest nature with That-which-is-beyond-ourselves, is born our ineradicable sense of moral obligation, which makes conscience such an august and unanalysable voice when it lays its command

upon us and says "*thou must.*" It is because of this deepest feature of our being that we always live by ideals, and judge each fact or event or experience in the light of a goodness which we do not see with our eyes and which does not, perhaps, yet exist on sea or land—a Beyond within us which our moral act endeavours to achieve.

The two worlds are never sharply divided and sundered. They merge and mingle. Each needs the other and each reveals the other. The outer world is more or less transparent to the clairvoyant soul that sees through and discovers the eternal breaking through it, and the most spiritual reality in the universe needs a temporal and visible manifestation and revelation to express and translate it. The soul of man is thus *amphibious*. It lives in two worlds at once. It lives outward and has its world of sense; but it always remains in undivided contact with Spirit, and so transcends and passes beyond all the facts and things and happenings in the thin fragment of reality that is tangible to sense.

II

THE MORAL UNIVERSE AND THE INDIVIDUAL

Some years ago experts, by clever scientific devices, made an accurate calculation of the avoirdupois weight of Mount Schiehallion, in Scotland. When this peak of earth and rocks was weighed as in the balances, it became a fairly easy problem to calculate from it the gross weight of the entire globe. Any good book on physical geography will now give this weight in billions of tons, but it is important to remember that the immense total was arrived at by first discovering the actual weight of one particular mountain.

Somewhat so the moral nature of the cosmic universe can be discovered only by a study of the moral nature of man, for it is in fact here, in this strange finite-infinite human being, and in his relations with other men, that the deepest moral meaning of the universe comes to revelation—here or nowhere. It is sometimes hastily assumed that the cosmic universe below the level of human life, *i.e.*, with man excluded, would be without moral implication. But there is no real universe with man excluded.

We know only of a universe which includes man. The inevitable process of our world leads up to a being who is self-conscious, who has experience of values, and who reveals moral preferences. Creation is not creation without this achievement reached. When we talk of the cosmic universe, we must include in it the emergence of man and the processes of history.

Amos, the earliest literary prophet of Israel, was the first to insist upon the fundamental moral character of the universe. He announced the discovery of a universal law of moral gravitation, as sweeping as Newton's law of physical gravitation. "I saw," this spiritual genius declared, "I saw the Lord holding a plumb-line in his hand." Every nation, according to the prophet's vision, had to meet this plumb-line test. Nothing could save or buttress a ramshackle moral structure, an unplumb life. The way of the transgressor was seen to be not only hard but impossible. The stars in their courses were allied against that nation which was not morally foursquare. But this herdsman of Tekoa, with his plumb-line, had almost nothing to say of individual conscience. He thought of men in the mass. The nation was the unit. His law of moral gravitation was

revealed in national catastrophes. By an insight which he could not have analysed, he leaped to a general truth that the universe is morally constructed, and that all the time men play their miserable games, the dice on the other side are always loaded—the universe is sensitive to all deviations from the moral perpendicular, and it executes its own laws. It remained for later men to discover in their own souls the unescapable evidence that the universe at its highest peaks, where life comes to self-consciousness, does reveal a moral law which, like gravitation, is grounded on the eternal nature of things and can be verified.

There is no finer pre-Christian instance of this discovery, the cardinal one which the race has made, than that revealed in the life of Socrates. His exterior was uncouth. But the moral character of his soul was sublime. His deepest prayer, if we can trust Plato, was that he might be beautiful and harmonious within. He lived and died in constant awe of a voice in his own soul which always seemed to him to be from God.

> " You have often heard me speak," said Socrates at his trial, " of an oracle or sign which comes to me as a divine thing. This

> sign I have had ever since I was a child. It is a voice which comes to me and always forbids me when I am going to do something wrong." "I am sent," he adds, "by God, to do the greatest possible service to the city of Athens. For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the improvement of the soul." "A man who is good for anything," this moral leader concludes, "ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good or a bad man."

He awoke his greatest disciples, and, through them, the world forever, to the meaning of individual conscience as a moral guide and as a key to the real nature of the universe.

In the dramatic struggle between the later civilisation of Greece and the Hebrew ideals, which was brought to its most acute stage in the Maccabean struggle against Antiochus Epiphanes, the note of individual conscience was once more clearly sounded—as finely sounded as anywhere in literature, and for ever afterwards made an essential part of the true Hebrew character. The moral issue is put in the form of a demand, made to selected individuals of

the Hebrew race, to fall down and worship a golden image, embodying ideals foreign to their faith, or as a consequence of refusal, to be cast into a glowing, red-hot furnace. The answer is a thrilling one: "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace, and he will deliver us. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."

The loftiest illustration, however, of individual loyalty to a guidance within the soul is to be found in the life of the great Galilean, and nowhere else in history has the ultimate moral nature of the universe been revealed through an individual conscience in such adequate measure. Not only at the opening of his ministry but throughout the entire period of his public mission, he was subject to peculiarly acute temptation in the choice of the means for the establishment of the kingdom, which it was his mission to inaugurate. He powerfully felt the popular patriotic appeal to be the Messiah of the nation's hope, and to fulfil the age-long expectations of His people and His race. On the other hand he saw with an unparalleled clarity of insight what was involved in the

essential nature of the spiritual life. He understood, as no one else has done, what are the ultimate forces which shape and fashion the moral world, and what constitutes the real goodness and blessedness of life. He came to realise that there could be no true kingdom of God that was not formed in the inner spirit and will of man, that love and grace and faith and good-will and patience and purity of heart are the essential qualities of the enduring kingdom of the spirit: that sovereign power and military triumph, and even miraculous achievements, are weak and futile as compared with the inherent power of gentleness, goodness, sacrifice of self, and dedication to the way of love. In the great test which came as the crisis developed, alone with his soul and God, he settled the momentous issue. The word conscience is never used in the gospels, but that inner tribunal which we name by that word is nowhere more clearly in evidence than in the stages of the decision that carried Jesus to the cross, in dedication to the untried but ultimately irresistible power of redeeming love. He emphasises at every point the nearness of the divine to the human in man, the infinite preciousness of the individual soul, the dramatic issues

of the inner life, the fateful decisiveness of moral choices, the fact that the kingdom of God is an interior spirit and not an external power. It is just because these truths are true that conscience can be the mighty force which it is.

III

THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF CONSCIENCE

The best account of conscience with which I am acquainted is not in a learned book, but it is from the experience of a little child. He had done wrong and had suddenly discovered through his act a new fact within himself. He came to his mother, and, before making the confession, which something within urged him to make, he naïvely said : " I've got something inside me I can't do what I want to with." Theodore Parker has given a touching account of a similar experience. It is as follows: " When a little boy in petticoats in my fourth year, one fine day in spring my father led me by the hand to a distant part of the farm, but soon sent me home alone. On the way I had to pass a little ' pond-hole ' then

spreading its waters wide. A rhodora in full bloom, a rare flower in my neighbourhood, which grew only in that locality, attracted my attention and drew me to the place. I saw a little spotted tortoise sunning himself in the shallow water at the root of the flaming shrub. I lifted the stick I had in my hand to strike the harmless reptile; for though I had never killed any creature, yet I had seen other boys out of sport destroy birds, squirrels, and the like, and I felt a disposition to follow their wicked example. But all at once something checked my little arm, and a voice within me said, clear and loud, 'It is wrong!' I held back my uplifted stick in wonder at the new emotion, the consciousness of an involuntary but inward check upon my actions, till the tortoise and the rhodora both vanished from my sight. I hastened home and told the tale to my mother, and asked what it was that told me it was wrong. She wiped a tear from her eye with her apron, and taking me in her arms, said, "Some men call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul of man. If you listen to and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey then it will fade out little by little and

leave you all in the dark and without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice.' "[1]

I propose to deal, all too briefly, with that strange, inevitable, irrepressible "something inside us" which, with a voice of authority, rules over our instincts and propensities. Whatever else it may be, it is something "we cannot do what we want to with." Its very owner and possessor cannot suppress it, cannot evade it, cannot brush it aside, cannot bribe it, cannot eliminate it. It is not an instinct, for an instinct is a specific way of acting to a specific external situation, while conscience is capable of the same endless variations of response that mark our appreciation of beauty; and it has no fixed set of reactions, determined by some mechanism in the physical structure. It is not a "special sense," for a sense must have a definite "end-organ" in the body, which is aroused by a specific stimulus and provided with a specific brain centre in the cerebral cortex.

Conscience has been thought of as "an oracle in the breast," and therefore as something alien to ourselves as finite persons. But, on

[1] For a similar story in the experience of John Woolman, see his *Journal* (Whittier Ed.) p. 53.

the other hand, it obviously tallies with the rest of our experience. It is not something apart or independent or unattached. It is embedded in our actual, concrete life. It harmonises and is consistent with our everyday human experience. It does not stand aloof above our life, as the rainbow stands above the onward flood of water at Niagara; it is rather a binding, organising principle which makes life stable and coherent. It attaches to the original capacity of self-consciousness, the capacity to create ideals, to look before and after, to out-span and overarch its own states and processes, and to review and judge, value and revise its own operations. Conscience is not an affair of some isolated part of us, the function of some fragment of our being. It appears rather to belong to our entire self and to underlie all the activities that are essential to personality. It is the whole integral self, becoming awake and active whenever the deepest issues of life are put in jeopardy or are at stake. It is the affirmation of our innermost character, the arousal in us of those ideal values which constitute our proper self. We move along unconcerned and unconscious until our central aspirations are threatened, or until the innermost ideals of our soul are

challenged, or until the end or aim that forms the submerged ground-swell of our life is exposed to danger. Until the crisis came, we may have lived almost unaware of these deep-lying currents of our being. We could not have answered perhaps easily, quickly and without halting, if some one had challenged us with the query, what do you want ? what does life mean ? what, after all, is your aim ? It had not been thought through or explicitly envisaged. But now a situation emerges which calls for decision and action, and suddenly we see revealed the fact that our choice between the alternatives will settle irrevocably the kind of person we are to be. That inarticulate ideal which all our previous life had been weaving now becomes alive and vocal. The ayes and noes are called for, and we vote to express and at the same time to guard and preserve what constitutes the permanent trend of our character as a person. *That which we are*, the whole of ourself, asserts itself and stands for its sacred rights of being. Conscience is thus the inner man's recognition of what is essential for the preservation and development of that which constitutes his real life. Not to have it would mean not to have consciousness of onward direction, or of any values to preserve,

or of any worth to life, or of any integrity to maintain. Whatever we may finally conclude about the nature of conscience we shall not be able to detach it from the soul's central ideal. It is at least the revelation of the kind of person we propose to be.[1]

"An erring conscience is a chimera," wrote Immanuel Kant, a little more than a hundred years ago. Conscience, he means to say, when it speaks with its true imperial authority, is magisterial, absolute and infallible. It cannot err. It is the voice of a supreme reason uttering itself out of eternity into time. Bishop Joseph Butler, writing half a century earlier, like Kant, gave conscience imperial authority. He said: Conscience is "a faculty in kind and in nature supreme over all others, and which bears its own authority of being so." He continues: "This is a constituent part of the idea of conscience, that is of the faculty itself, to be superior and to take the superintendency: to preside and govern, from the very economy and constitution of man, belongs to it. Had it strength as it has right, had it power as it has manifest

[1] See Professor Hocking's interesting position in *Human Nature and its Re-making*. Yale Press, 1918, p. 99.

authority, it would absolutely govern the world."[1] Another great churchman, almost in our own time, John Henry Newman, emphatically took the absolutist position for conscience: "Conscience," he declared in 1875, "is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas."[2]

Thomas Carlyle in England, and Ralph Waldo Emerson in America, were powerful exponents in the nineteenth century of this majestic and authoritative conscience. Carlyle in *Past and Present* said: "Thus does the conscience of man project itself athwart whatever of knowledge or surmise, of imagination, understanding, faculty, acquirement or natural disposition he has in him, and, like light through coloured glass, paint strange pictures on the rim of the horizon and elsewhere. Truly this same sense of the infinite nature of duty is the central

[1] Kant's Preface to his *Metaphysical Elements of Ethics*. *Butler's Sermons*, Sermon II. Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist made Reason and Conscience synonymous with what he calls "the light within," and he held, like these other absolutists, that conscience stamps with the Great Seal of God all acts that are right. Reason then always countersigns the acts thus stamped with this royal seal.

[2] In *A Letter to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk, on occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation* (1875).

part of all within us ; a ray as of eternity and immortality immured in dusky many-coloured time and its deaths and births."

Emerson expresses as strongly as does Kant the *ausserordentlich*, absolute character of duty. " Within this erring passionate mortal self," he says, " sits a supreme, calm, immortal mind." " It is stronger than I ; it is wiser than I ; it never approved me in any wrong ; I seek counsel of it in my doubts ; I repair to it in my dangers ; I pray to it in my undertakings. It seems to me the face which the Creator uncovers to his child."

Twice in his poems Emerson has given as lofty expression to this august inner voice, as appears anywhere in modern literature.

" So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
So near is God to man,
When duty whispers low, ' Thou must,'
The youth replies, ' I can.'

" Though love repine and reason chafe,
There came *a voice without reply*,
'Tis man's perdition to be safe,
When for the truth he ought to die."

It would be easy to go on increasing, almost without limit, the testimony from great writers and distinguished thinkers to the unique and authoritative character of the moral voice within

the soul. If there were no counter-testimony, no other side to the question, there would be no *problem* of conscience. There might still be a mystery about it, as there is about all the deep, bottomless realities of human life; but if all men agreed that the soul of man is supplied with an unvarying, unmistakable, oracular, inerrant, absolute moral voice, the baffling, tragic problem, so familiar to the serious modern man, would largely vanish. Unfortunately there *is* "another side." Good men as devout as Bishop Butler, and great men as conversant with the nature of man as Immanuel Kant, deny that the human soul is furnished with an infallible moral organ or faculty, by which the eternal right is revealed here in our finite, temporal world of mutability. They insist that there are variations in moral pronouncements, as there are in all other lines of human striving and in all other fields of man's endeavour. Whatever finite instrument man may possess, they tell us, is subject to mistake and error, and the moral insight is no exception—the trail of finitude marks all his faculties, even the highest ones.

Robert Barclay, who gave in the seventeenth century the classical interpretation of the Quaker

view of conscience, accepted the fact that there are great variations in human conscience. He accounted for this unhappy fluctuation of the standard by supposing that conscience is a natural faculty, and subject to the warping influence of instinct, nurture and casuistry. His solution of this obvious difficulty was that, while the natural conscience is variable and uncertain, there is something vastly superior to conscience within reach of man's soul. This superior guide, Barclay called "the light within." This light is, he held, absolutely divine, of a wholly "different nature from the soul of man and its faculties." It is "not any part of man's nature, nor any relic of any good which Adam lost by his fall." It is distinct and separate from man's nature—a super-added, supernatural "gift." Being divine and spiritual, it cannot be corrupted or influenced by the impact of this imperfect world. It forever, through all mutations of space and time, remains pure and unaltered. When conscience is "informed and enlightened" by this superior light it becomes purified and rectified. The blindness of natural judgment is removed, and the false opinions of the understanding are dispelled. Conscience is thus to be compared to a lantern, and this light within

is the candle which illuminates it. "The lantern is useful when a clear candle burns and shines in it; but it is otherwise of no use."[1] We have a lantern of our own, but it is inadequate until a mysterious torch is lighted in it and burns with a light not our own, from a world beyond this finite one.

This became for many generations the generally accepted Quaker view. The Friend who held this position formed the conviction that he was the direct recipient of the will of God, and he believed that his oracular voice within was the absolute word of God to him. This interpretation of conscience produced, as one would expect, a body of people who felt confident that they were in possession of the *truth*, and who unhesitatingly believed that the ultimate principles of righteousness were unveiled to them. That faith gave them an undoubted moral force. "Individual faithfulness" became the supreme watchword, and "obedience to the light" was felt to be the most sublime and awful duty that this world could know.

Almost exactly this position was held by many of the scholastic theologians, especially by the great mystics. There is, they believed, an

[1] See Barclay's *Apology*, Prop V., Sec. 16.

uncreated essence within the soul of man, a spark of light, the seed or ground from which all spiritual activity springs. They called this basic foundation "synteresis" (sometimes incorrectly spelled "synderesis"). It is a divine centre, or substratum of the soul, a provision of the constitution of the soul by which man recognises moral distinctions and assents to the appeal of obligation. It is the function of conscience, on the other hand, they held, to decide what particular act in the complications of life is right or wrong. This decision involves judgment, and judgment often errs. It includes an emotional factor, too, and the emotions swerve us from the true aims of life. Conscience, as the guide in the mazes of this earthly life, is thus subject to error and mistake; it may go right or it may go wrong. But the synteresis, the unsundered basis of the soul, which has the illumination of God in its very structure, is absolute and infallible.

One trouble with this scholastic theory, as with Barclay's, is that it introduces us to an infallible resource, but at once informs us that in all emergencies of life we must use a poorer device. It is slight satisfaction to know that we possess an absolute provision, if, the moment

we come to act, we must "change our gear" and serve ourselves with a more clumsy human contrivance. All our moral acts and decisions lie in the sphere of the concrete and particular, and we are not greatly assisted by a provision which applies only to goodness in the glorious abstract. This theory will, I am sure, help us to explain the origin of conscience when we come to that problem, but it does not work in the practical task of finding out what is the right course of action just here and now, where the many paths of the way deviate.

This account of conscience was no doubt a valuable interpretation at the time when it was formulated, and it served a good purpose in the period when it was customary sharply to separate the divine and the human into dualistic compartments. Under systems of thought which once prevailed there seemed no way to maintain the divinity of Christ without seriously blurring or even tacitly denying his humanity. The *either-or* dilemma appeared inevitable. To insist upon humanity was to slight divinity. To exalt and glorify divinity was to reduce humanity to an appearance, an illusory seeming. The same situation attached to theories of Scripture infallibility. In order to safeguard the

authority of the Bible, it seemed necessary to claim not merely divine inspiration, but even dictation by God of the actual words, so that the writers were reduced to mechanical puppets who simply transmitted what was communicated to them; and Balaam's ass, on this account, might be regarded, and sometimes was regarded, as no less adequate a reporter than Isaiah or Paul. On the other hand, as soon as one began to emphasise a human and literary element in Scripture, he was bound to be suspected of heresy, and set down as a bold denier of the divine authority of the ancient word. The world was doomed on this basis to travel a curious zigzag course, one extreme of emphasis leading inevitably to a compensating swing in the opposite direction.

The dualistic interpretation of the universe was responsible for another famous theory of conscience, which long held the field—the intuition theory. This was the view that conscience is a divinely implanted faculty or moral sense, supplied from another world to the new arrival here in this one. It is a complete and independent contrivance for knowing virtue. It is neither derived from reason nor acquired by experience. It is a God-given monitor, a

precise and unerring guide. One may obey its pointing or not obey it, but it remains, from the beginning of life to the end of it, an oracular voice, announcing the path which ought to be taken.

It was natural, under the conditions of thought which prevailed, that the authority of conscience should be maintained in this ready-made, easily workable fashion. It was supposed that only by a severe " dichotomy," cleaving asunder the human and the divine, and making conscience wholly derived from yonder, could its " superiority and superintendency " be secured and guaranteed. This fixed, static, immutable oracle, foreign to the human characteristics of the soul and from beyond its margins, unaffected by any changes or variations of earth, did not present the same intellectual difficulties to seventeenth and eighteenth century psychology that it does to the experience and the psychology of the present time. We do not like schemes which split our universe into compartments, and set chasms between the here and the yonder. Our moral decisions cannot be detached from the natural psychological functions by which we live. We must decide what to do in complicated situations which have grown out of social and historical movements; and our decision, in

order to be right, must be one that will produce the best moral results, not for some remote other world, but for this one here where our moral issues lie and are to be found. It would be as intelligent to treat of the harmonious beauty of Beethoven's music without any reference to human ears that can hear it, as it would be to talk of consciousness of moral duties without consideration of social institutions in connection with which duties have meaning and significance.

Bishop Berkeley thought that all facts of sense experience were the result of direct divine communications from the mind of God to the soul of the individual. This intuition theory does not see any necessity of going to that metaphysical extreme, but with restraint insists only on direct infallible revelations in the moral sphere. In this one region of our life everything that concerns us is operated from the other world, and comes from yonder. Every revelation of duty is divinely communicated. Every intimation of the right course is injected into our natural man, somewnat as the click of our electric clock is injected into it from a dynamic centre at Greenwich or Washington.

This theory of conscience as an implanted

oracle not only commits us to a dualistic universe and a dualistic human nature, but it takes from us our moral autonomy. It makes us hollow pipes for a voice not our own to sound through. In the striking words of Coleridge, spoken against a similar theory: "This breathing organism, this glorious *panharmonicon*, which I have seen stand on its feet as a man, with a man's voice given to it, the doctrine in question turns at once into a colossal Memnon's head, a hollow passage for a voice . . . and yet no man uttered it and never in a human heart was it conceived."[1] It makes the very basis of morality something foreign and external to ourselves. All the rich "life and co-agency of our humanity" is miraculously suspended. Our moral faculty becomes inexplicable in terms of anything known to us. A voice which comes from outside our human experience, and which we can never investigate or verify, imposes an absolute command upon us, and we must always obey it without ever knowing or asking *why*. On this theory any individual may always defend his course on the claim that he is obeying the infallible divine voice. It supplies us with

[1] Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, Letter III.

no universal and overarching moral truth or principle, by which individual differences can be settled. It furnishes us autocratically with a ready-made decision for each occasion, and we have no function but to accept or refuse it. The individual is a mitred pope. His dogmatic deliverance ends all issues. He can challenge all opposition with the assertion, "I am the recipient of an infallible revelation, the oracular voice of a divine command."

The solid moral experience of the race casts grave doubt upon this claim to infallibility. Persons who have made the tremendous claim have often proved to be misguided, and some of the deeds which men have performed on the "infallible" ground of an authoritative voice do not now seem to enlightened men to have been heaven-guided. We have, too, been learning that God does not supply us with easy, labour-saving contrivances which relieve us of perplexing and tragic strains. We have been compelled to spell out with slow and painful effort the secrets of nature which might have been "communicated" to us from the start, so that we should have been spared the long, weary wilderness wanderings of discovery. We might have been told where the coal lay hid and where the oil

was stored. We might have had an early message about the microbes and antitoxins, which would have saved us many losses and catastrophes. The information was not vouchsafed. No kind voice from the sky announced the errors of the Ptolemaic astronomy and the truth which Copernicus discovered so late. The race was for long centuries within easy reach of electrical energies, but no "sociable angel" was sent to tell us how to tap these sources of power. Mechanical short-cuts and magical clicks which transmit from another world our moral deliverances must therefore be open to some suspicion. Finally, it does not seem true to the actual facts of experience that everybody always, on all concrete occasions of life, has a perfectly clear, definite and precise revelation of the right course. The Psalmist said: "I open my mouth and pant for thy commandment." Those who are not psalmists have often felt as he did. There can be no doubt that every moral person has, at some eventful cross-road moment of his life, longed and panted for a clear knowledge of the right course which, with all his sincere yearning, he could not discover. Much of our moral effort, it is true, is due to the fact that we

cannot raise our will to the pitch of following our vision, but we also most surely experience this other difficulty. We want to discover the right trail in the complicated jungle which environs us, and we cannot tell infallibly which track leads toward the light and will unerringly take us to the goal.

One does not need to have been charged with the " cure of souls " in the world of our time in order to be impressed with the reality of this perplexity. What one of us, if too old ourselves to be at the cross-roads, has not tried to help some serious-minded youth, face to face to-day with difficulties as hard as those which confronted Antigone whose heart led her to take one course while the laws of her country required her to take a different one? We have seen men of the most unquestionable honesty, and of sun-clear purity of purpose, unable to discover, by any click or through any infallible mechanism, what the sure path of their feet really was; and, when they emerged from their moral struggle, we have seen one man following one hard path and another man, equally honest and sincere, following a path antithetic to the first one, though perhaps no more soft or easy.

But we run into greater confusion, and we make the perplexities of life still greater, when we assume that conscience is nothing but a mutable and errant empirical feeling, developed by the natural processes of an evolving world. Many attempts have been made to explain conscience as a slow, natural acquisition either in the individual or in the race. No theories of acquisition by education or by evolution give any adequate account (1) of the origin of conscience, nor (2) of the august and authoritative character of it. It is easy to see that there is an educational factor always in evidence wherever conscience appears, but it is impossible to understand how mere social habits and family customs and the influence of praise and blame, of approval and disapproval, could of themselves *produce* the overwhelming conviction of duty, or the compelling sense of obligation, which mark conscience at its highest. This explanation gives no clue to the majesty of an autonomous moral self. Some original and underived capacity must be assumed in the very structure of the soul which makes the child responsive to moral education, for no external authority could teach the child moral duty except by calling into activity the latent powers

of his soul.[1] Huckleberry Finn is speaking, not as a character in fiction, but as a real boy alive in the world, when, pagan as he is, he comes suddenly upon the immense fact that "conscience takes up more room than all the rest of our insides put together."

Evolutionary writers have tried to push the education further back, and to explain conscience as a product of the slow disciplinary culture of the race. Writers like Herbert Spencer have contended that the new-born child literally inherits the immemorial gains of the centuries. He arrives with the intellectual and moral riches which his less favoured ancestors have won. He is literally heir of all the ages. He comes equipped with what society has learned and now requires for its continued existence. This theory assumes, without sufficient proof, that the tiny increments of moral wisdom which each generation acquires are inherited by the offspring of that generation and passed on to the remote heirs. But this immense claim is unproved. There is grave doubt whether acquired characteristics, gained by the efforts of a parent, are ever inherited by offspring, and

[1] See Hastings Rashdall's *Conscience and Christ*, p. 24.

that questionable theory must in any case be affirmatively proved before we can use it as a natural explanation of conscience. Professor Edward Westermarck has written a great two-volume work, full of learning and patient research, tracing from the lowest levels of life to the highest the slow accumulations of emotion and behaviour. L. T. Hobhouse has, with no less success, followed the stages of the evolution of emotion as action, as they enter into moral conduct. More important than either of these books is A. F. Shand's *The Foundations of Character*, a contribution of immense value. But none of these volumes, however valuable their anthropological history of instincts and emotions may be, explains to us the majesty of duty or the imperial authority which not only Butler and Kant recognise, but which the most humble of us have sometimes realised. There is something there which the history of instincts, emotions and behaviour fails to reach.

It does not seem possible for any extension of our scientific knowledge to reduce conscience to a naturalistic explanation. Its power over us cannot be explained on the ground that it aids survival. The distinction of right and wrong does not rest in the ultimate analysis

upon prudence, foresight, or any consideration of utilitarian results, in fact upon any extraneous or self-advantageous considerations. It cannot be reduced to a fine calculation of results. It cannot be traced to an emotion, or to an instinct, which aided survival, or to a racial habit or custom. We do not catch the secret of conscience by any study of the slow results of restraint or the fear of punishment, here or hereafter. The difficulty about the whole situation is that fear of consequences is not morality—it is fear of consequences!

It proves to be impossible to explain the higher, the essential, features of conscience by a reference either to biological history or to the influence of social environment. We have in the sublime obligation of duty a fact of the most momentous significance. It attaches not to an accident of biological survival. It is rooted in the fundamental nature of self-consciousness It is bound up with the unique fact that man is *man* and not animal. It has the same standing and the same sure ground of validity that *truth* has in the sphere of knowledge. When we speak of truth we always mean something wholly different from "opinion." Truth rises above the variations of sense reports and the

accidents and caprices of contingent happenings. It voices something as universal, permanent, unalterable, irreversible, eternal, and absolute. It gives us contingent items of experience, but here at length they are organised through a universal, rational principle which abides and holds firm through all the welter of change and variation. Its basis, the basis of truth, is not to be found somewhere outside in the stream of events, it is to be found inside, *in the nature of the mind that knows*.

Archbishop Temple has finely expressed this fundamental distinction which belongs to our nature as rational spiritual beings. He says: "However far our doubts may go, they cannot root up from within us, without our own consent (nor, I would add, even with it), the power which claims to guide our lives with supreme authority. They cannot obliterate from within us the sense of right and wrong, and of *everlasting difference between them*. They cannot silence, unless we join in silencing, the voice that bids us believe that, in spite of all that can be said, seen, or felt, the law of right is the eternal foundation on which all things are built. By this a man may yet live if he has nothing else to live by,

and God will assuredly give him more in His own good time."[1]

The central meaning of *ought*, and the categorical distinction of right and wrong, cannot be stated in terms of anything else, or identified with any other content of consciousness but themselves. We have here come upon something *sui generis*, like the appreciation of beauty, or the truth of mathematics. One either has the trait or does not have it, but if a man is not elementally susceptible to the meaning of *ought*, he cannot be taught morality—any more than he could be taught mathematics, if he had no perception of the special distinction of " up and down," or " out and in." It is quite likely—in fact it is only too obvious—that there are men and women who are almost neutral when confronted with moral issues. They are not so much immoral as unmoral. They hardly know what one means when one talks of categorical imperatives and the overwhelming sense of ought or ought not. They have not been there. They see as those do who have no eyes. Plotinus has well said: " As it is not for those to speak of the beauties of the material world who have never seen them or known them

[1] *Rugby Sermons* (First Series).

—men born blind, for instance—so must those be silent about the beauty of noble conduct and knowledge who have never cared for such things ; nor may those tell of the splendour of virtue who have never known the face of justice and temperance, beautiful beyond the beauty of the morning and evening star."[1]

Every analysis of conscience reveals an element in it which cannot be explained by anything else, any more than the taste of sugar, or the smell of a rose, or the perception of redness can be explained in terms of anything else. There is an elemental aspect which could not be derived or acquired. The categorical distinction of right and wrong which conscience voices may possibly aid survival but in any case it does not get its lofty place in human life on the ground of its survival-value. Its origin in us appears to be due to the fundamental fact that a person is an ideal-forming being. He always extends his world in ideal directions. A person is never confined to the world of " things as they are." He is never limited to objects that are given in experience. He always transcends and sees beyond the facts and items which his senses present. This

[1] Enneads I. 16, 4.

creative, idealising tendency is one of the most unique and original traits in us, one of the deepest facts of personality as well as one of the most mysterious. Our driving forces are to be found in our instincts and emotions, but our ideals are our directive powers. They organise the instincts and emotions; they raise and transform them so that they are no longer instincts in the blind and primitive sense. They cease also now to be mainly egoistic and self-seeking, and yet their energy and effectiveness are greatly heightened as they come to be expanded and transformed through ideals.

Our moral grandeur springs from this capacity of ours to live beyond and to outrun anything which the world of experience gives us, and with this idealising capacity—the power to look before and after—is linked an inevitable sense of obligation to act in conformity with what the soul sees *ought* to be. It is a normal feature of personality to live not only in reference to considerations of prudence and foresight, but also to live in reference to an ideal spectator, to do right even when the world is not looking on or viewing the deed. We assert by an irresistible compulsion the incomparable worth

of our personal ideals, and the moral insights which attach to them. We build on ahead of experience and fashion the inner world that ought to be, and this vision makes us dissatisfied with anything that comes short of our ideal good. Some persons no doubt possess this power of transcending the actual more strongly than do others. The reference to an ideal spectator is weak in some and powerful in others. The appeal from what is here and now to that which ought to be does not operate alike in all bosoms.

Plato, with his symbol of Gyges' ring, has expressed the view that the "many" do right because they fear consequences. This ring enabled the possessor of it to become invisible at will. He could always escape notice, and could therefore pursue his pleasures and achieve his ends without being observed or caught. Could anybody be found who might own this extraordinary ring with perfect moral safety? Are there persons who would take no advantages of the privileges of its magic? Plato knows at least of one such person. He has drawn the portrait of a moral genius whose supreme prayer was for inward beauty, and who took his hard course of action, not out of fear of any kind of

consequences, but in order to conform with a heavenly pattern in his soul.

It is probably true that conscience rises to its august height only in persons who may be called spiritual geniuses. We do not estimate the significance of music by the performance on the Indian tom-tom. We find it revealed in Mozart or some other outstanding creator. We do not judge the scope of art by the Maori carvings on a walrus' tusk. We see it at its full glory in the Sistine Madonna or in Michel Angelo's Moses. So, too, we shall never apprehend the nature of conscience if we study it only as an anthropological emotion. We see what it means and we discover its full implications in persons of marked moral profundity.

There is an underived ethical core in us, or at least in some of us, which gives us a fixity of soul for that which ought to be. This elemental basis of our conscience cannot be traced to any physical origin, it cannot be reduced to a biological function, it cannot be explained in utilitarian terms. It attaches to our deepest spiritual being—our inalienable tendency to form ideals and to feel the imperative call of what ought to be. Its development can be

traced; its origin cannot be traced. The elemental distinction of right and wrong is presupposed in every appreciation of moral quality, just as every judgment of beauty presupposes an appreciation of beauty. The structural distinction of right and wrong is an endowment of reason which cannot be identified with anything else or traced to any "naturalistic" origin. It is that basic foundation of the soul which the mystics called "synteresis," or junction of the soul with God. It is what Kant calls the categorical imperative, or the soul's fundamental assertion of a distinction between right and wrong. It is so essential to a rational being that in denying it you tacitly affirm it, and when it appeared the race first began to be human—man emerged, "Adam" was born!

Every little creature in the myriad hosts of life's immense output is different in some respect from every other. Every tiny being that gets born has some slight mark of uniqueness. This fact—a fact which we do not explain—is what makes life a varying affair. Every germ in "the enormous fecundity of nature" has its own irreducible peculiarity. Somewhere, sometime, in the great stream there came a being that was unique in this, that he did not live merely by

fact and act for the sake of consequences, but he felt the moral worth of certain acts and could recognise an "ought." *He judged his conduct by an ideal which outran his deed.* There have been many crises in the history of evolution—moments when something qualitatively new appeared, and of which no exhaustive psychological explanation can be given. *Mutations* are not only unpredictable, but they are inexplicable in terms of the environment. The birth of self-consciousness is one of these crises. The appreciation of beauty is another. The birth of religion, the soul's consciousness of a great Companion, is another. The appearance of conscience, the distinction of moral right and wrong—is another. It is as original and irreducible as the consciousness of up and down or of before and after. In a word, it is as underived from anything else as the perception of time and space is.

All knowledge of concrete times and spaces implies a susceptibility to time and space already in the capacity of the mind that perceives. Without an underived distinction of "before and after" I could never learn about times, and without the capacity for "within" and "without," and "up" and "down," I could

never get the idea of particular spaces. The idea of space is pre-supposed in all experiences of spaces. The mind of a rational being comes already equipped with these essential conditions of knowledge—these capacities for experience —which are filled with content by actual experience. So, too, a person must be susceptible to the meaning of "ought" before ever he can learn from experience what is right and wrong in a given concrete situation. The capacity for duty is, thus, native and original, a condition of all moral appreciation; our judgment upon the particular definite things that are right and wrong is always coloured by experience; that is to say, the formation of our actual standards, the creation of our concrete conscience, is an immense social process, as I shall endeavour to show. If this view is correct, we discover why conscience is so imperative It is an irreducible fact of reason itself, using reason in the broad sense which has become familiar since Kant. It cannot be eliminated or destroyed without abolishing rationality itself. It is bound up with the very nature of reason, as is our absolute certainty of mathematical truth, or as is the inevitable idea that an effect must have a cause. Deny it, ignore it,

disobey it, transgress it; it still confronts one as unsuppressed and absolute as ever.[1]

This view of conscience is no less a divine reality than Barclay's view, or the intuition theory, would make it, only its divine quality is not to be secured by isolating it and dividing it off from man's essential nature. We cannot prove a revelation or pronouncement to be divine by merely insisting that it is unconnected and unrelated with anything in our finite experience, or by saying ever so emphatically that it has been injected into time from a realm beyond time. The divine is not confined and limited to another world than ours. It can be a fact and quality of our own essential life, and if we are to find it anywhere we must find it here.

> "Draw, if thou canst, the magic line
> Severing rightly His from thine,
> Which is human, which divine."

This fundamental distinction of right and wrong, this compelling sense of obligation, seems to be the very mark and badge of man's origin from a deeper spiritual universe, or at least of his present relation with such a universe.

[1] NOTE.—I have been influenced here and elsewhere by the lectures of my Harvard teacher, Professor George Herbert Palmer.

As a child bears forever in his body the marks of his origin from his mother, so this moral capacity marks the point of juncture with a spiritual realm from which we have come and with which we are still connected. The Beyond is within. We are embedded in a larger consciousness than that bounded by the margins of our finite self. We come here upon the central fact which makes man an ethical person. In his essential nature as a self-conscious being, looking before and after, and judging his deeds in reference to a world as it ought to be, man is always more than finite—he is over-finite. We can and often do treat the individual as a finite unit for practical purposes, but to do so is to reduce him to a static, abstract thing, quite unlike the living concrete self of real inner experience. He is now a sundered fragment and not the organic whole we know as a spiritual person. The latter always involves and manifests an immanent principle which transcends the finite fragment. We look down on our fragment-self from the watch-tower of our wider, larger self, and approve it or disapprove it, in the light of an ideal which sweeps far on ahead of anything the finite fragmentary self has ever experienced. This "dividual phantom self,"

as Coleridge called it, is forever set in and organic with a more than its own tiny domain. The sense of imperfection which marks all our experience, the glory of the unattained which attracts us, the unstilled desire for the beyond, the "hints of occasion infinite" that keep us alert for moving goals, all have their ground in this indissoluble junction of our nature with the spiritual Whole in which our consciousness is set.

But at the same time, there is a large temporal and historical factor in every man's conscience as it is formed and filled by experience and education. It bears, and must bear, the marks of the social group in which it has been developed. It is influenced, as all our ideals are and as personality itself is, by the social life of which we are an organic part. Edmund Burke was right when he talked of the social conscience as "the bank and capital of nations and of ages." We are woven inextricably into the fabric of some living group. We catch a thousand features of our life through unconscious imitation. We take over from our social group the very language through which we form and express all our ideas. It is here, in this indispensable social environment, that we discover our

primitive desires, and that we make our earliest experiments in finding out what we want and what we do not want—one of the greatest experiments in this human venture of ours! Tones, looks and gestures of approval and disapproval work powerfully upon the acutely suggestible infant mind. Family customs, personal influence, the appeal of rewards and punishments, the illumination of discipline on the plastic mind, are profoundly formative. During the long period of helplessness and dependence, the child slowly learns what the race has learned. Play, art, literature, religion, begin now to make their immense contribution to his inner life, and he becomes acute and sensitive to the requirements of the society of which he is an organic member.

This explains why in the early stages conscience is negative. The individual instinctively follows custom. So long as he goes along with habitual tendencies he is unconscious of any guiding, as is the case with all subconscious functions. But let a subjective inclination push him in a direction contrary to custom, and immediately self-consciousness is awake and a collision or conflict appears within. So long as there is conformity, conscience slumbers; the moment the individual

asserts himself against the social group, conscience is wide awake, his deed reveals dangers and gives him trouble. Duty at this stage arises as a limitation of individual impulse. The primitive moral consciousness is knit in a close solidarity with the life of the tribe. The "self" in the early stage is hardly differentiated as a separate fact. It is a living cell in a tribal organism which is the real unit. Hebrew story is rich with material bearing on this negative and tribal conscience. We see in the Old Testament how in generation after generation the individual was merged into the corporate life of the racial group, and how difficult it was for the individual to pursue a course which conflicted with established law and custom. Greek literature reveals a similar custom. The Spartan soldiers at Thermopylae felt they had no private, individual choice. They were merged into the life of the tribe. "Tell Sparta you saw us lying here," their epitaph says, "in obedience to our country's call." Socrates, with all his prophetic leadership, to which I have referred in an earlier section, was deeply immersed in the social life and custom of his race. His divine voice is in all reported instances a restraining, checking guide. When escape was possible he remained in prison

and accepted the hemlock in unquestioning obedience to the laws of his country.[1] The Hebrew prophets, however, and the Greek tragedians take us up to a different moral level. Here we have a profound conflict of duties, and conscience appears as a positive, affirmative, pushing force. It becomes a silent but august revelation of an ideal course of action.

As soon as personal life grows rich, complex and reflective, the simple, primitive instincts no longer work as blind, unconscious motor forces as they were at first. They are organised now into wider systems of emotions and sentiments. They become infused with intelligence, and guided and controlled by reason. They minister to the higher ends and ideals of life and serve to fulfil spiritual values. I am using *sentiment* of course in its nobler meaning, as the best modern writers on the emotions have taught us to use the word. "Sentimental" and "sentimentality" have acquired an undesirable reputation, as something soft and flabby, but we must not allow the associations formed around those words to keep us from using the word sentiment in its true and proper sense. Every

[1] This attitude of obedience is the subject of Plato's *Crito*.

sentiment includes in a single unified system a complex of instinct, emotion, thought and will. It forms a tiny sphere of its own within the wider life of the person. Imbedded in it, controlled by it, are instincts which by themselves would be blind and egoistic. They are, however, raised and transmuted by the organising energy of the system in which they are merged. This is the way in which all spiritual achievements are made. Instincts are not "killed," they are not eliminated; they are ruled, subordinated, and made to minister to purposes and aims that reach beyond the welfare of the single self in which the instinct was born. Wherever love and loyalty come into play a system of this type is found, a system of rationalised or idealised desires is created. Such a system, with its inner springs of love and loyalty, makes conquest of egoistic traits and brings into operation a spirit of devotion, dedication, self-sacrifice. All sentiments of this loftier sort reach out beyond the interests of the individual, in modern phrase they are over-individual. They have to do with the self plus its wider relationships—its relationship with other persons, with beauty, with truth, with goodness, with a communion of saints, with God. Under the sway of an idealising sentiment

it becomes natural for one to live, or even to die, for the end upon which the sentiment is focussed and around which it is organised. "Nature" itself thus becomes spiritualised and transformed through the transmutation of desires. The whole level of the human aim is raised. Action no longer centres on mere survival of existence. The person under the sway of an organising sentiment is absorbed in the triumph of ideal values which are worth infinitely more than houses or lands or body or bread.

Conscience on this higher level, as the voice of the ideal self, operates more often unconsciously or subconsciously than consciously. Its decisions seem "instinctive," "second nature." They are arrived at by processes that appear "intuitive." That is, however, not because conscience was put ready-made into the individual at birth. It is because the central ideals in us are deeper than reflection reaches.

"Beneath the stream, shallow and light, of what we say we feel,
Beneath the stream, as light, of what we think we feel,
There flows with noiseless current, obscure and deep,
The central stream of what we feel indeed."[1]

It is also because action under the sway of

[1] Matthew Arnold.

ideals and sentiments has formed habits and tendencies which fit the direction in which our personality is moving. But there often appears to be a " rivalry " among the ideals which control us and shape our deeds. There are many possible ruling systems of sentiments, and the world has never fully agreed upon an unvarying order of their importance. Love of family, love of friend, love of country, love of church, love of race, love of truth, love of God—which of all these is the highest loyalty and the most sacred system of desire or of sentiment? Temperament, education, character, will in large degree determine in our personal lives in which direction our ideals will organise our sentiments, and so form the dominating passion of our souls. The lover, the patriot, the martyr, the saint, have each felt clearly that life came to its consummate glory in the end for which they severally lived and died. There is no arbiter who can settle this question between ends which are all good in themselves.

But nothing surely can be higher or diviner than a life organised under the ideal which Christ has revealed and fused with His spirit. As I have said in a former section, His way of life reveals individual conscience in its most acute

and exalted form. It does not mean that self is obliterated. It does not mean that life ceases to be this-worldly and becomes other-worldly. It rather means that the soul's vision opens out upon the reality of a God of perfect goodness and love, joining Himself with us and forever needing us to complete His own purposes. It means going out to the tasks of life with faith in the complete triumph of love, a readiness to go to all limits of suffering and crucifixion for this faith of love. It means an overmastering conviction that human lives united to Him and dedicated, as He was, to love can help bring into being a Kingdom of God, a brotherhood of those who live by truth and love. To live Christ's way of life means dying to selfish and utilitarian aims through inner assurance of fellowship with Him and with the whole human family in love, in faith, in life and in service. To have these aspects merged into one ruling system of thought and emotion and will is what I mean by the sentiment of loyalty to Christ, which spontaneously reveals itself in the conscience when the moment of choice comes. It makes all other " goods " and all other ends appear inferior and subordinate in comparison. It holds the soul like adamant, and is as near to an absolute

authority as one can find in this world of change and process.

But it now appears that this positive type of affirmative conscience, the creation of the higher sentiments and the voice of the ideal self in us, is no longer stern and hard, cold and foreign, a fusion of commands and terrors "a rod to check the erring and reprove." A certain sense of awe will always attend, as is fitting, this lofty function of the soul. The forward way of love, as it separates us from many things we should like to keep, will be, in the words which Edmund Spenser used reverently of his wife, "our dear dread." But conscience on this higher level ceases to be an alien voice, a threatening law-giver, reproving and over-awing us. It becomes rather the deep ground-swell of a whole unified, organised personal self, moving toward the end for which it dimly feels it was made. It operates less and less explicitly, reflectively, as a conscious judgment, backed and buttressed by effort. It works more and more as a directing force below the threshold, a new and transformed kind of instinct, an instinct which has been created rather than blindly received. It is a moral dexterity of soul, and yet almost possessing

the well-known unerring accuracy of instinct. It has close affinity to the higher order of aesthetic taste. In fact the greatest of the Greeks identified beauty and moral goodness. Their loftiest word for personal character was the composite word "beautifulgood." As my old teacher, Professor G. H. Palmer, has finely said; "The most triumphantly beautiful thing in the world is a good life." The stoic and puritan moral harshness is here transcended, as is also utterly transcended the calculating, prudential regard for consequences. Freedom and joy are gloriously realised. Duty wears

> "The Godhead's most benignant grace;
> Nor know we anything so fair
> As is the smile upon her face."

I conclude, then, that conscience is both divine and human. In origin it goes back to the very moral nature of God Himself. It always comes from beyond the isolated person, the fragmentary self, for in the depth of our being we are never sundered from God. We are at least at one inner point conjunct with that Person who is the life of our lives. For this reason some kind of moral ideal is inherent in the nature of man. But on the other hand all moral ideals—*i.e.*, all the calls of conscience,

have a temporal history. They are slowly formed and shaped by the gains and testings of the ages. The race discovers what in the *long run* will and what will not work well for humanity or for a smaller social group of humanity; what destroys and what constructs personality; what enlarges and what restricts the life of the group itself. The guiding formative influence of the group in the primitive stage of the race and of the individual can hardly be overstated. But this must not blind us to the fact that conscience, as soon as it rises as a fact, is, first, last, and always, an individual thing. The phrases "social conscience" and "group conscience" are very common, and are very often used as though corporate conscience were an actual reality. The words, however, have only a figurative meaning. The only consciousness which psychology can recognise is consciousness appearing in individual persons. Many such persons may and do act in intimate concert, and join in common pursuits and purposes, but even so they do not fuse into a literal "organism" with a unified consciousness of its own over and above the individual consciousness.

If that is true of consciousness in general it is

no less true of the particular aspect of consciousness which we call conscience. The only centre of experience is the individual mind, the only point at which the distinction of right and wrong is brought to focus is in the inner life of the person. Society finds its voice and discovers its direction in the consciences of individuals, in the many centres of personal experience. Reasoning, suggestion, imitation, contagion of ideas, are no doubt real forces which tend to carry one person's thoughts and ideals into the many lives which compose a group; but there are no forces which *compel* the individual to adopt an ideal, however forcibly it may be proclaimed. The individual holds the key of his destiny in his own hand, and no organism, no group, no corporate life of any kind can, by causal forces, overwhelm and determine the personal will.

Great moral geniuses appear from time to time, who push the common ideal of goodness a stage further on, and by degrees the whole race is raised to that height. Hastings Rashdall has well said: "In the ethical region—men of science are beginning to say in the biological region also—nature takes more leaps and longer leaps than *a priori* evolutionary thinkers like

to admit. And the form which such leaps assume in the moral region is most commonly to be found in the appearance of great personalities. . . . Men's capacities for ethical judgment vary enormously; and average men have to rely to a very large extent upon the judgment of the gifted few. The prophet or great personality may be looked upon as one in whom Conscience has attained an exceptional development."[1]

The hardest issues, the most tragic collisions, that ever come are the conflicts between the old fixed order, the *status quo*, embodied in the social group, and the forward-pushing ideal, embodied in the moral reformer, whether he be gifted as prophet or genius, or whether he be only an ordinary person who cannot make his individual vision fit with the moral residuum from the past. On the lower scale morality, as its name suggests, was conformity with the accumulated wisdom and customs of the group. On the higher level it becomes a solitary adventure, a heroic faith in a vision of what ought to be, though it is not yet actual anywhere on sea or land. "Narrow creeds of right and wrong" must yield and give way before "the

[1] *Conscience and Christ*, pp. 21-22.

unmeasured thirst for good," incarnate in some brave soul, who goes forth to try his soul and to lift the common standard. As fast as any moral gain is won, it is wrought out into forms of social institutions; it is embodied in art, in literature, in law, in religion, in social etiquette, in the system of education of the period, in national hopes and ideals.

Each person thus forms his own moral ideal —the ground swell of his own inward voice of what is right for him in the social environment into which he is born. He is, from his earliest days, a member of the society already moralised, a fellow citizen of a state in which morality is more or less objectified and made visible. He must form his own moral ideals by means of the moral attainments of the race, and these ideals will always have the mark and brand of a temporal epoch, and there will always be a local colouring upon them. But he may, as has been said, and in fact he should, transcend the common level of his time, and push the moral goal beyond any previous attainments, though it must be along lines already potential; and his ideal, his attainments, must be tried out in the siftings and testings of social history.

Conscience, as we have seen, in its loftiest

stage, is no longer negative. It affirms a unique personal life. It has a positive aspect; it is the knowledge of a higher will than that of our momentary, isolated self. *It is the voice of our ideal self, our complete self, our real self, laying its call upon the will.* This voice, this call, comes up out of the deep, for the ideal which a man has and by which he shapes his life is, as I have said, subconscious rather than explicit and thought out. But it is not something foreign to the man himself, it is not something external to him, it is not some one particular instinct among other instincts. It is the complete self voicing its ideals and exerting its sway over passion and impulse and momentary self and courses of action which fall below our vision. It forms itself slowly under education and environment as the character forms, and it is unique and august because it is the deepest self rising into consciousness and asserting itself. It is the true self vocal.

If this is a sound view, we see that the moral standard is always being made—never final. It shows, too, why we do not all have the same conscience. There will always be the personal element present, for each man's ideal has formed under particular circumstances, has aspects that

are unique, and has been slowly shaped by experience. But conscience is more than subjective opinion or individual caprice. A person's conscience to be sound must have imbibed the spirit of the social group, past and present, living and dead, in which it was formed ; and if in any particular it is unique or peculiar it should be by transcending the realised morality of the group on lines already forecast by past experience.

Though we cannot make the immense assertion that conscience is absolutely infallible and a precise guide under any and every circumstance of life, it is nevertheless the surest moral authority within our reach—a voice to be implicitly obeyed in the crisis of an action. It is our highest guide. No command on earth can take precedence of it. Nothing more autonomous or more worthy of obedience can be discovered. But, even so, it must not be allowed to crystallise or to become a static, habitual moral form. The Pharisee, the inquisitor and the bigot are appalling illustrations of the dangers that beset the arrested, conformed conscience, even when it is honest. It needs constant re-examination and revision. The influences which re-make and re-vitalise it

must have no terminus. There must always be adjustments to new light, a healthy, living response to fresh truth, and a continual transformation of conscience in relation to the growing revelation of God. It must be under the watchful guardianship of the awakened and enlightened spirit. Conscience is, thus, like the mariner's chronometer. While he is in port he tests it out by all the expedients known to the science of the clock maker. He perceives and realises that it is subject to slight variations. But when he is at sea he implicitly trusts it, reckons it as reliable as the movements of Orion or Arcturus, and sails his ship by its pronouncements.

One other danger must be guarded against, or at least reduced to its lowest minimum—I mean the danger of self-casuistry. Few things in human experience are more subtle than are the ingenious psychological methods and processes by which we often defeat ideal courses of life, by the use of expedients and labels to excuse a choice of the least ideal alternative. No one can arrive at a decision where there is a conflict of issues, until he succeeds in making one alternative fill the focal centre of attention and so dominate consciousness. The complicated

process of deliberation—which constitutes the main drama of our inner life—is an oscillation of mind from one alternative to another in the search for decisive reasons, reasons which can prevail, and in this state of suspense, while the search is going on, we are strongly prone to ease the strained situation by finding heads or labels under which to classify our motives so that they will satisfy our reason. Cut-and-dried maxims, fine-sounding formulae, authoritative principles work almost like magic here. Before one knows it one is swept on toward a momentous decision under the spell of a rubric. The subtle casuistry works both ways. It may furnish a pretext for evading the call of the ideal; or it may, again, supply a ground for stubborn allegiance to what is called an "ideal" while in fact the other alternative is really higher. There is, thus, no short cut, no labour-saving device, no magic contrivance that can save the soul from the stern moral effort, the "slow dead heave of the will," that in a crisis puts all the accumulation of character, all the gathered wisdom of life, all one's faith in the eternal realities, into the scale for the venture.

The last place of refuge amid the confusion of the world is this inner citadel of the soul.

We owe almost everything to the larger society of which we are an organic part—almost everything, but there is one thing we can never surrender, barter, or disobey at the command of any social authority whatever, *the august voice within us*.

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